

“Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan”

Erin, Year 8



Write your response to the poem considering the theme of identity, the language, and structure. Use evidence from the poem to support your ideas. Explore the language and make inferences from the language and structure. Look back at your PEE table. Write in paragraphs.

My response to “Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan” by Moniza Alvi

Before we begin to read the poem, I notice that the lines are not straight and formal, rather jagged and uneven. This represents her struggle with her identity, being half English and half Pakistani, her thoughts miscellaneous and conflicted with no sense of order, just like the lines of the poem. It is also written with enjambment, in which the lines of a poem do not have full stops and keep the steady flow of the story consistent. Here it is used to show her train of thought, her brain constantly thinking about everything without pausing. Often, there is no correlation to the lines in the poem, rather like our thoughts do not have to be logical all the time. It could also represent her journey which never seems to end.

It begins with her opening presents sent by her Pakistani Aunts, who have sent her many Asian clothes. She describes the salwar kameez as “peacock-blue”, the sari “apple green” and the embossed slippers as “gold and black”. Alvi describes them with bright and cheerful colours, which help us to vision the luxurious garments she has received. This contrasts with her opinion when she wears the salwar kameez, saying “my costume clung to me and I was aflame”, making it seem as if she were an actor performing an act. The adjective “clung” suggests she is stuck to her heritage and she cannot deny it, making her feel uncomfortable physically and mentally when she wears the clothes. The word “aflame” suggests she is embarrassed and perhaps even ashamed to wear them, as your body temperature rises when you are feeling those emotions. This comes from the fact she is only half Pakistani, and “couldn’t rise of its fire, half English, unlike Aunt Jamila”. She desperately wants to be Pakistani just like her Aunt Jamila but feels trapped by her English heritage. When Moniza receives and wears the garments, she feels like she is pretending to be someone she’s not, a true Pakistani girl.

When she “tried each satin-silken top” and it “was alien in the sitting room” it shows us what she thinks of the Pakistani culture - it was new and unrecognisable with no way to tell if it was good or bad. In a Western sitting-room, the Eastern clothes stood out from everything else, being different and almost like another creature from another world. This is why I think the word “alien” was used to describe the clothes as a whole-new and different compared to everything else around it. We also know she feels insecure being half Pakistani as she says, “I could never be as lovely as those clothes”, going as far as to compare herself to inanimate objects. When she wears these clothes, she feels as if she is not living up to her Pakistani heritage and is not worthy to even wear the clothes. However, the line “I longed for denim and corduroy” is said right after she says it wouldn’t be as lovely as those clothes. Alvi has grown up with the Western culture and feels most comfortable with it, shown when she wanted Western clothes when she was exposed to Eastern ones. Here I think the clothes represent the different cultures and her different feelings towards them - loving the appearance of Pakistani culture but not feeling comfortable with it but trying to ignore her English heritage while at the same time liking its familiar customs.

“Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan”

Erin, Year 8



The conflict between English and Pakistani culture continues as “the school friend who sat on my bed asked to see my weekend clothes” after seeing Moniza’s salwar kameez. In an interview with Moniza Alvi, we learn that that she made up the school friend and was a representation of another thought process, where she thinks people were judging her for being half Pakistani and not fully English. The word “impress” also highlights her insecurities being half English and half Pakistani, wanting to show the other cultures who she was, only to be rudely dismissed. Perhaps it was a way of saying she didn’t like the clothes and or the Pakistani culture entirely, only liking the appearance of them rather than the feel. The school friend would then become her honesty, knowing she wanted “denim and corduroy”, not a salwar kameez or salwar bottoms in which she felt trapped when worn.

Alvi also feels disconnected to Pakistan as a whole, having to “picture” her “birthplace” as she has no memories of going there as she was too young to remember. Picture implies she saw it as a distant fairy-tale land, captured by a camera that could only explain so much of Pakistan to her from bare footage. When she “was older, there was a conflict, a fractured land throbbing through newsprint”, expressing her inner turmoil with Pakistan, a conflict between two completely different cultures. Pakistan is being described as a “fractured land”, which is incomplete like a broken bone. Moniza has no idea what it is like and is trying to piece together the puzzle pieces of bones to build up its structure, like that of a living being, to finally understand what it is really all about. The powerful phrase “throbbing through newsprint” means she is only getting to know about Pakistan through newspaper without getting to know its culture or customs. Throbbing is normally used to describe a hard, consistent, pulsating beat, rather like the way newspapers will show hard fact and information in a consistent manor, with no room for daily tales or usual customs. Moniza has no way of knowing what Pakistan is really like living in England, as the newspaper she is provided with only tells her the most urgent news and not the ways of living there.

At the very end of the poem, Moniza talks about the people in Lahore, her “aunts in shaded rooms”, and that there were “beggars, sweeper girls” but she was there with “no fixed nationality.” She feels as if everyone has found their purpose already, with a nationality there to guide them towards their destiny, however Moniza could not use her nationality because she has no fixed one, is she English or Pakistan? She is torn between two completely different worlds, thinking she has to live in one or the other. Moniza desperately wants to be completely Pakistan but is uncomfortable with its strange new culture. At the same time tries to reject her English heritage, while also enjoying its familiarity. At the end of the day, she wishes she was either one or the other, English or Pakistan, where she could then choose who or what she wanted to be with supposed ease.